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Comics--as a special literary genre--must be judged by special criteria. In fact, the four-panel daily comic strip must be judged by different standards from the full-length comic book or the single- or double-frame comic. Among the four-panel strips are found comics that make a claim to literary quality--"Li'l Abner," "Pogo," and "Peanuts." These comic strips are "uniquely expressive" and transcend the severe limitations of their genre through a creative use of language and symbolism. Charles Schultz's technique in "Peanuts" involves understatement and symbolism through which adult personality types act in the guise of children. Walt Kelly's "Pogo-lingo"--a purposeful, comic distortion of language employing many puns--becomes part of the cartooning style and, thus, has graphic value. Like Kelly, Al Capp is a satirist, and his Abner is in the American tradition of the innocent picaro whose responses reveal the shams of society. (JS)

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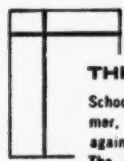
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THIS MONTH'S COVER

School's out! Surf's up! Hit the Beach! This summer, thousands of kids will go down to the sea again... on boards, or read about it in Peter Dixon's *The Complete Book of Surfing* (Ballantine, 75¢).

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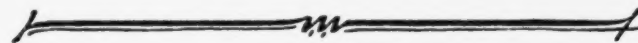
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Comics as Classics? by Charles Suhor

THE VALUE OF COMICS has been a subject of debate in America for almost three decades. In the 1940's parents and teachers fretted over the degrading effects of comics on American youth. In the 1950's psychologists and educators investigated the claim that comics might be related to juvenile delinquency. More recently the comics have been viewed as a charming and highly revealing expression of popular culture, and exegeses of modern society like Marshall McLuhan and David Manning White have commented on the role of the comics in shaping modern life.

But the comics have seldom been considered from a purely literary point of view. "Literary" evaluations of the comics have typically consisted of irrelevant comparisons to more complex genres, without reference to the structural qualities that are unique to comics. The practice of comparing comics to novels recalls the simplistic methods of many critics in the 1940's who set out to demonstrate the inferiority of jazz by comparing the form of a Beethoven symphony to the *Saint Louis Blues*—invariably to the disadvantage of the latter. But a genre is not defined in terms of the characteristics of other genres. A *haiku* is not accurately described as a bad sonnet, nor can a sonnet be seen as a watered-down epic poem. A genuine literary criticism of the comics must begin with the comic genre itself.



Charles Suhor, presently on an Experienced Teachers Fellowship at the University of Illinois, has contributed articles to *Down Beat* and *Delta Review*.

Comics must be judged by special criteria, since the cartoonist's skill is an essential part of the total impression created by any comic strip. It is also evident that different *kinds* of comics are subject to different standards of criticism, because structural limitations differ greatly in the case of the single frame comic, the 2-panel comic, the 4-panel daily comic strip, and the full length comic book.

The creative possibilities of the comics have not been, perhaps cannot be, realized in all of these comic forms. The single frame comic, for example, is intrinsically limited by its rigid format, which from *The Yellow Kid* (the first real comic) to *Toonerville Folks* to *They'll Do It Every Time* has consisted of a humorous action in the foreground, commented on or complicated by one or more figures in the background. In the two-panel comic, the second panel simply exposes the chicanery or hypocrisy of a character introduced in the first. The cluttered canvas of the single frame comic and the pat formula of the two-panel comic have produced little more than occasional witty satirical barbs.

The full length comic book, or "funny book," has given psychologists much to toy with, but seldom has it produced anything of literary value. The comic books of the Disney-Schlesinger-Lantz variety have been consistently wholesome since the early 1940's, but clearly they are lacking in literary interest. They have had considerable influence on American culture, but it is the airy and limited impact of a Hans Christian Andersen tale or a Strauss waltz—a genuine but profoundly unprofound grass roots pop art. The few

full length adventure comics that offered, by accident or design, a kid-sized *Weltanschauung* (*Captain Marvel*, *Superman*, *The Phantom*, *Buck Rogers*) might reveal something about popular fantasy-patterns and stereotypes, but this is hardly a literary perspective.

It is in the four-panel daily comic strip that most of the comics that can make any claim to literary quality have appeared. The viability and appeal of *Li'l Abner*, *Pogo*, and *Peanuts* may be attributed to an instinctively creative response to the possibilities of an extremely confining genre.

The limitations inherent in the four-panel comic are manifold. The four-panel comic demands a simplicity in form and content and discourages extensive use of dialogue and virtuoso art work. The comic is basically a visual art, an art of action in which the action itself must stand out clearly against a simple, uncluttered landscape. Unless the cartoonist consciously uses these limitations as a gimmick and an identifying aspect of his style (as in *Smoky Stover*), the use of excessive dialogue and over-ambitious art work can destroy the clarity and pace of a comic strip. (Perhaps it was excessive dialogue that killed Crockett Johnson's brilliant *Barnaby* strip.)

The limitations in content in the four-panel strip spring from the limitations in form. How can the writer hope for any significant development of character, plot and theme when working with a minimum of dialogue? Moreover, attempts at subtle development of a character or at introduction of a sub-plot are virtually impossible when the artist must confront the reader with such minute units of story each day. Compression is necessary: characters must be utterly self-revealing. They must react in caricatures of human emotion if the story is not to be protracted to absurd length—a practice which would run counter to the reader's desire to enter into a world that is clear and highly animated in content as well as in form.

The comic strip, then, is unsuitable for treatment of "serious" themes and characters. Adventure and humor, both of which are compatible with stereotyped characters, are adaptable to the comic page. Attempts at creating "drama" (*Mary Worth*, *Judge Parker*, *Rex Morgan*, *M.D.*) result in a comic literature that makes soap opera look like high art. The gag, the quick quip set in motion in the first panel and brought to a peewee crescendo of renewed comic anticipation in the last, is the format most natural to the comic strip. And indeed, a wide variety of comic characters—many of the

"classics" of the comic world—fall into this category: *Blondie*, so true to American family life of the first half of the century; those misplaced vaudevillians, Mutt and Jeff; *Smoky Stover*, overflowing with outrageous puns and zany irrelevancies; *Bringing Up Father*, which turned the comic art onto the age-old problem of the uneven battle of the sexes.

But these famous comics, however quaint and steeped in Americana, only fulfill the comic genre. They do not rise above it, as *Li'l Abner*, *Pogo*, and *Peanuts* do. How, then, do the best comics transcend the limitations of the genre?

PSYCHOLOGY AND SATIRE

First, they do excellently what all good comics do. The art work bears the unmistakable stamp of an original cartooning stylist, and it is uniquely *expressive*. The successful cartoonist brings a sense of motion to every panel, drawing the reader actively into the four-panel sequence with a remarkable sense of presence and immediacy. Al Capp is superlative in this respect. *Li'l Abner*'s huge feet seem almost three-dimensional as he struts good-naturedly through a panel; Mammy Yokum's violently clairvoyant trances are as throbblingly alive as the heartbeat of Poe's famous tale; the bizarre ingredients that go into Kickapoo Joy Juice seem to evoke visually a terrible stench as Hairless Joe and his Indian pal stir the cauldron.

Charles Schulz's artistic technique in *Peanuts* is understatement. In his own way Capp's equal in expressiveness, Schulz can portray a sheepish, guilt-ridden grin, a grimace of exasperation or a bad attempt at suppressing hostilities with little or no overt action on the part of his characters. Schulz can, of course, depict motion magnificently when the occasion calls for it. When motion comes, it is typically spasmodic and consciously overstated, as in Snoopy's ebullient dances or Lucy's cyclonic shouts of anger that literally cause Charlie Brown to do a flip backwards. But the basic artistic device employed in *Peanuts* is not gross physical action but an essential restraint brought hilariously to life with a few economical strokes of the pen.

Clever cartoon styles, however, are not rare in the world of the comics. The three comics under analysis have, in varying degrees, two qualities that finally lift them to the sphere of art: they employ a creative use of language and, most importantly, symbolic elements either in the basic structure of the strip itself or in episodic materials. These symbolic elements are the

vehicle through which the comic artist exposes foibles and makes his comments on society.

The freshest use of language appears in Walt Kelly's *Pogo*. While Capp is more faithful to the dialect of his characters than his predecessors were, Kelly's language goes far beyond relatively familiar dialects to a unique Pogo-lingo, an ingenious, purposeful distortion of language for comic effect. (E.g., Kelly's delightful Christmas carol parody, "Deck Us All with Boston Charlie," or a recent comment by a Pogofenokeean: *In my country we leave no stone unthrown for justice*.) This is not mere malapropism but a creative toying with sounds and words, much in

the style that John Lennon uses in his book, *In His Own Write*.

Moreover, in Kelly the dialogue is part of the cartooning style; it has graphic value. Kelly makes extensive use of selected words and syllables printed (or rather, "drawn") in boldface or small print (a) to depict the vocal inflections in his characters' speech—in much the same way as J. D. Salinger. Moreover, Kelly not only portrays the dynamics of conversation more expressively through the wide range of graphic techniques at his disposal (b), but he playfully interweaves bogus dialect stresses (c) and submerged puns (d).

Kelly enlivens his dialogue with visual devices that comment on the character of the speaker or the quality of the utterance (e). At other times the cartography of the dialogue directly complements the action in the panel (f).

Schulz's use of language, like his cartoon style, takes a different form from that of Kelly and Capp. The characters in *Peanuts* alternate between kid talk and the most improbable adult diction. Charlie Brown says *I don't pretend to be a student of prophetic literature*; Linus, watching an ant, observes that *He's grinning in a knowing way*; Lucy won't stop crying: *Why should I deprive myself of an emotional outlet?* Schulz did not invent anti-climax, of course, but who else has been able to use it so integrally and persuasively in a comic strip?

The most brilliant individuating device used by great comic artists is the manipulation of symbolic materials. With Schulz a simple overriding device—the play of adult psychology within the winsome children who move about the panels—is employed in a variety of situations as several adult personality types act and react under the innocent guise of children.

This unlikely device “comes off” in *Peanuts* because of the magical combination of the basic child-adult masquerade, the clever understatement of Schulz's cartoon style, and the skillfully manipulated language. Despite the wide acclaim that the strip has received as a perceptive critique of modern life, however, it is high comic art by virtue of its synthesis of formal elements, and not by reason of any striking originality in its intellectual content. Schulz's material in itself carries no new insight into the nature of contemporary anxiety.

The social commentary of Kelly and Capp, like the dialect, is in the Huckleberry Finn tradition in American literature. Pogo and Abner are innocents, lovable picaros whose spontaneous responses to social institutions throw light on the pomposity, evil and waste in contemporary society. Kelly, of course, is the less incisive social critic. His strip was at its funniest and most popular in the 1952 presidential campaign (“I Go Pogo”), during which he good-naturedly and quite transparently satirized the political scene with a portable smoke-filled room, two pinko cowbirds that spouted Marxian clichés, a clock transformed into a walking “political machine,” an elephant and a donkey who agree to take turns winning at badminton and to share the same balloons in their dialogue.

Capp's gift for satire is well known. Indeed, Capp hits so hard and so often and at so many

targets—Vietniks, social workers, foreign aid, television, the welfare state—that he might well be dampening the effect of his more penetrating social criticism. Still, future scholars seeking out an index of social problems of the mid-twentieth century in popular literature will find few more thorough and more amusing commentators than Capp.

Capp's upbraiding of modern society has taken many forms, but his most memorable—and most prophetic—contribution is the shmoo. The shmoo, Capp fans will recall, is a pear-shaped animal that solves all of humanity's problems. It lays eggs, gives milk, tastes delicious, reproduces with incredible rapidity, grows whiskers that serve as toothpicks, and, best of all, loves to give itself to mankind.

But with the discovery of the shmoo (when it escapes from the Valley of the Shmoon) come the problems that are inevitable when a society is freed from the burdens of existence—millions are put out of work, excessive leisure begets indolence and self-indulgence, the economy is in chaos. Capp foresaw and expressed through the comic medium the pitfalls of a prosperity that liberates man from the familiar world of drudgery, only to place him in a vacuum of inactivity which he has no resources to cope with. While the shmoo is certainly not a symbol of automation and cybernetics, it created problems of abundance and leisure which automation and cybernetics are posing for contemporary society. What happens, Capp is asking, when the American Dream comes true and a society accustomed to toil finds itself at last provided with daily bread—but robbed of its daily labor?

Capp, Kelly and Schulz inherited the four-panel structure from their predecessors. Their genius, like that of Louis Armstrong in jazz, lay in their ability to inform an apparently static structure with a bristling artistic energy. With *L'il Abner*, *Pogo*, and *Peanuts*, the comic genre achieves not maturity but a healthy adolescence: it is still “kid stuff” yet it is earnestly at war with the fraud and pretense of the adult world. Perhaps it will never grow to full size, but the American literary tradition is rich in examples of profound juvenilia, from Twain to F. Scott Fitzgerald to J. D. Salinger. The comic is American mirth, democratic mirth, the mirth of a nation so bent on equality and self-improvement that it must use its popular arts as media for education and as an outlet for the creative energies of its people. The logic can be expressed in a paraphrase of Schulz's Lucy: why should we deprive ourselves of an outlet? *end*